

Southeast Conference Annual Meeting 2014

State of the Conference Address

Presented by June Boutwell on June 20, 2014

Thank you all for being here tonight. I wish this could be a very relaxing dinner and a time for us to be in nourishing conversation as we nourish our bodies. But the nature of Annual Meeting is that there is much to do and it is hard to find time to do it. So I appreciate your indulgence and attention.

It has been a busy time so far. 16 folks attended the Authorized Ministers Retreat yesterday where Valerie, Linda, and Felix led us through a process to look at our call, a map of how we got to our present place in ministry and did some dreaming and thinking about what we might want to do/be as we go forward in ministry in the Southeast Conference. And this morning, prior to the start of this meeting, Persons in Exploration and Members in Discernment held a mini-retreat with the members of the Commission on Ministry MID Committee. I hope you take some time to greet and meet these leaders of the church who are following God's call to serve the church. We are formed in community and your presence and support are an important and meaningful part of their journey—of all our journeys in our ministries, no matter what form that takes.

I want to be very clear about my role within the Southeast Conference. I was called to the ministry in which I serve on your behalf by a special Conference meeting on February 1 and began my work with you on March 1. In part, my call from the Conference reads that I become *pastor and teacher for a period of three years....During this time we ask that you lead us in a process of visioning, planning, and preparing a road map for our future, as described in the Conference profile....At the end of the designated term, the Conference Board of Directors may elect to extend this call for up to two additional years in order to complete the work of building a new structure or preparing the way for new ministerial leadership.*

Visioning, planning, and preparing a road map. All activities that require more than one person to accomplish. So expect to be asked to participate in a variety of ways as the entire Southeast Conference begins this journey into the future. We have begun that journey already with the activities prior to this meeting. We have begun that journey already with many invitations to meet you in your churches and at fellowship events so that I can get to know you and listen to your stories and your concerns. My goal is to physically be present in every congregation in this conference by the end of 2014. So keep those invitations coming. Your dreams and concerns are part of that visioning process.

The theme of this meeting is a way to begin that journey. We are the youngest/newest Conference in the United Church of Christ. The subtheme of "against all odds" is a way to allow us to share and reflect on our history. This Conference holds an important legacy of ministry and witness. We hold and cherish in this place the American Missionary Society founding institutions of higher education in the South so that emancipated slaves could improve their lives. We remember with gratitude and compassion all those who were on the front lines and in the back rooms of the civil rights movement. We recall with grieving all those who gave their lives for equality and dignity. And we honor those who still work in those areas of justice and witness and service to others. They are an important part of the story of struggle, a theme that continues today and in some different ways.

I have already heard many stories of my predecessors in this ministry—Roger Knight and Tim Downs have often been mentioned. I have heard stories of the struggle of churches to be a vital presence in their communities. I have prayed with pastors who seek to be faithful and enlivening leaders. I have preached in congregations that are grieving what has been and wondering what is to be in their own ministries. We all know that these are challenging times with changing demographics, in some places shrinking numbers and less resources and money than we need for the ministries we are committed to.

But even as we reflect on the challenges that have shaped us and formed us for ministry in this time and place, we are aware that the Holy Spirit is moving among us and calling us to celebrate possibilities made visible by the legacies we hold and honor. We are told to take off our sackcloth and ashes, to shed our mourning clothes. We are to boldly declare our role in the King's court and claim our power and our ability to bring about healthy change even as we hold and cherish all that has enriched our lives and ministries and all that continues to move us spiritually, emotionally, in discipleship, and in relationship.

Have you ever been in the mall or the transit station or on an airplane flight where there is some kind of display that indicates "you are here!?" That is the picture that I want you to consider. We are all represented on the map. We need to look at where our roads of ministry intersect. Here at this meeting is a good intersection. And we need to look at the road signs that we see along that path. Do you see a stop sign, a yield sign, a u-turn or no u-turn, dead end, merge, exit, one-way, construction ahead. We need to pay attention to those signs and understand what they are telling us. Right now you have given me a green light. Now some of you know that I am a big NASCAR fan but I am not going to get into the fast lane, I am not going to go off-road, I not going to race down the track. And I am not going to drive this bus by myself. We are all on the road together and we need to pay attention to the traffic around us and the pedestrians and the aggressive drivers and those in the slow lane. And we need to look at that map as we begin this journey together.

Hopefully the events of today have started to position us on that map so we know our neighbors a little better and have had a look at the roads we are traveling and see what we need to do to improve the infrastructure. I am feeling blessed that the leadership of this conference has done a very good job of starting the Southeast Conference map through the Conference Profile and the Transforming Churches, Transforming Lives capital campaign.

Here is what I am currently thinking about as we begin this journey based on the areas outlined in the Conference profile (which is available on the Conference website) and the goals of the capital campaign.

PROFILE: Build greater community and connection across our geographically, culturally, economically, racially, and spiritually diverse conference. These diversities bring unique strengths and potential for learning, growing, and ministry.

CAPITAL CAMPAIGN: Building covenant and connections across the geography of six states through technologies that will help connect local churches, church starts and conference staff for teleconferencing and web and video conferencing. This will enable greater access for churches to conference meetings, leadership training and online educational courses. These technological connections will help reduce the isolation felt by churches separated by geography.

HOPES AND DREAMS: We need to Share our Good News! We have made a start at this meeting with the churches who have brought a display of the Good News! of their congregations. I hope you take some time to look at them in the exhibit space. We don't share our good news with each other and we need to do that so we can identify common concerns, the possibility of shared resources, and to let folks know in the Conference community and wider community of our presence and our ministry.

We need to explore the function of an Association when there is no longer responsibility for authorization of ministry. The Alabama Tennessee (Mississippi Florida) Association has been looking at this for the last year through its Re-Imagining Task Force and will be presenting a report to their Fall Association Meeting. They will provide some markers for our map as we look at our structure. But Associations are still the place where we can celebrate our fellowship and connections and support ministries so we need to look at how we might design that component to build greater community.

Many of you know that as Associations disbanded, the Conference established a Commission on Ministry. It was a bare bones structure that has been finding its way over the last two years. We

need to strengthen the policies, procedures, and processes of this vital leadership body. This is an area where I have years of experience and will be working with Valerie Coe Lowder as the new chair of the Commission and the various committees charged with doing the work of authorizing and supporting ministries in this Conference.

We need to reclaim the support and nurture functions outlined in the Manual on Ministry including annual review, periodic review and church consultation. To that end, I will be suggesting that we retool one of the existing committees-Consultation and Review- to be a Support and Nurture Committee that looks to be a place to support and nurture congregations and pastors in this Conference. The other piece I am looking related to Commission on Ministry is the position of a registrar to tend to recordkeeping and things like licensure and transfer of standing. I will tell you that I was very surprised that the Conference Minister was also registrar. For me that is a boundary issue and vests far too much power and authority in one office. We have someone that has volunteered to be registrar for a year and to help develop the job description. My hope is that this will be an elected position next year along with the chair of the Commission on Ministry. But this will require some changes to the by-laws.

Also very important is this area is the development of a clear and comprehensive communication strategy. We are looking at the possibility of setting up data hubs—teleconferencing centers that will allow people to be together in a meeting without being in the same place but have full audio and video communication. This project envisions three data hubs—one in the Conference office and two others whose locations are yet to be determined. The Conference office will be submitting a grant request to the Capital Campaign to fund equipment and training for this project.

Related to our communication strategy is the formation of an editorial committee that will assist with the monthly electronic newsletter and our web presence. Essentially we are looking for folks who are interested in this kind of ministry and will be willing to act as stringers or news gatherers in their Association area. Another way to share the Good News! and to ease the burden on staff as decisions are made about content, software, and the overall communication strategy in print, web, social media, and special communications.

PROFILE: Build leadership for the emerging Southeast Conference. Existing churches are being revitalized within the conference and new churches join the conference each year. The needs of the church of tomorrow call for creative, committed, ordained and lay leadership. We are developing such leadership through the PATHWAYS program. Begun in October 2012, Pathways is a new, four-year program that provides a dynamically interactive web-based platform for theological and hands-on education for individuals seeking an alternative route to ordained ministry.

CAPITAL CAMPAIGN: Building leadership by creating a comprehensive learning environment to serve and equip the lay and ordained leadership of our local churches. Working with the national setting of the UCC and Lancaster Theological Seminary, our goals include:

- building a program of ongoing support and training
- expanding professional development through seminars and convocations
- developing conference -based training for preparation for ordination
- expanding the Pathways program for training lay leaders
- developing scholarships and support for Pathways
- providing mentoring and coaching for new church developers and leaders of churches involved in revitalization

HOPES AND DREAMS:

Building a program of ongoing support and training and Expanding professional development through seminars and convocations: Boundary awareness training for clergy and lay leaders; Development of lay leadership events such as mission fairs and vitality events; Establish practice circles for clergy,

Retreats for Board of Directors and Commission on Ministry to be equipped to do relationship building, visioning, and planning. Clergy retreats for currently serving clergy, new clergy to the Conference, retired clergy, and those in non-parish or specialized ministries. The retreat for authorized ministers with sixteen people attending prior to this meeting is a start on that road and there will be a joint Southeast and Southern Conference Retired Clergy retreat this fall October 6-8 at Blowing Rock Camp and Conference in North Carolina.

Developing conference-based training for preparation for ordination: Live into what it means to have multiple paths to authorized ministry and strengthen the functioning of the Member in Discernment Committee of the Commission on Ministry.

Expanding the Pathways program for training lay leaders and Developing scholarships and support for Pathways: Finish implementing the full three levels of the PATHWAYS program, marketing assessment and ongoing marketing efforts, identifying resources already existing and future possibilities to support the ongoing efforts for students and a position of self-sufficiency for the overall program itself.

Providing mentoring and coaching for new church developers and leaders of churches involved in revitalization: Continue to work with the Center for Progressive Renewal, the national setting of the United Church of Christ (especially Local Church Ministries), and identifying and training coaches and mentors to work with revitalizing churches.

PROFILE: Build local church development and renewal. We are a geographically large Conference, with a modest number of churches. The states and persons represented in the Southeast Conference area are ripe for the message of the United Church of Christ. People are growing weary of traditional religion in a box and are looking for an authentic, mission-minded, difference-making, life-giving Church. We have a tremendous opportunity to recognize and provide that alternative in our region...to create, grow, and renew church in the Southeast.

CAPITAL CAMPAIGN: Building congregations is the third initiative. The goals are:

- *training conference consultants to support congregational revitalization*
- *training and coaching for pastors and lay leaders engaged in revitalizing their churches*
- *seed funding for birthing new churches*
- *church development training and coaching as well as a network of consultants for intense training with local congregations engaged in the work of expanding justice and community outreach.*

HOPES AND DREAMS: We currently have 52 churches and 4 new church starts (NCS) on the Conference rolls. Alabama-15 churches and 1 NCS, Florida Panhandle-1 NCS, Georgia-19 churches and 2 NCS, Mississippi-2 churches, South Carolina-3 churches; Tennessee-13 churches. We have had 13 new or affiliating congregations (including the new church starts) in the last 10 years. Of course they all range widely in size, their theological leanings and involvement with the Conference.

We are working with other Southern Region UCC Conferences to develop a regional UCC presence in the South and consider ourselves the South's best kept secret. We will also be looking at strategic partnerships such as strengthening the UCC and Disciples of Christ Partnership including ministries focused on disaster response, global ministries, and boundary awareness training and working with other ecumenical partners on justice and community outreach.

We will continue to work with Center for Progressive Renewal, Local Church Ministries, and other programs to provide education and training for support and resourcing of local churches engaged in revitalization. We also have a goal in this Conference to support the national Testimony! new church funding initiative. Each church should remember to pick up their packet at the registration table. I get inquiries every day from folks looking for a church that fits their values and from congregations with the same question. How do we provide for a welcoming place for them to engage in gospel ministry?

So that is a little about what I am thinking, dreaming, planning. But we are all driving this bus together so...

What is missing?

What traditions have we lost that we want to reclaim?

What new dreams can we dream?

What resources do you know about that can be shared with others?

What are your ideas/hopes/dreams for building the body of Christ in this place?

I have to tell you that I am so very excited by the level of energy, the assurances I have received from many folks, the churches that have invited me to be present, and the folks who have been in conversation with me about their concerns and dreams. This next year will be a time for sharing, reflection, dreaming, building, asking questions, thinking critically and strategically. I think we will have much to consider at this meeting next year including some by-law revisions and perhaps some structural adjustments. And by then good policy, procedure, and process should be a part of all that we do in the Southeast Conference as we move together into the future that God envisions for this place, this people and this ministry. Please do be in touch with me by phone, email, Facebook, letter, or face to face. I am here for you and we are here for each other for such a time as this.